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Giovenale Sacchi on Mozart the prodigy (1770)

David Black and Dexter Edge

Giovenale Sacchi, *Della divisione del tempo nella musica nel ballo e nella poesia*. Milan, 1770

[199]

AL CHIARISSIMO SIG. GIUSEPPE
TARTINI.

[...]


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TARTINI.

[214, footnote] [...]

In questi ultimi anni si sono veduti in Milano due fanciulli ammirabili: l’uno l’anno 1768 di anni 13. chiamato a nome Francesco della Motta, e nativo, se mal non mi ricordo, di Malines, il quale con somma perfezione, e grazia a prima vista eseguiva qualunque più difficile sonata di Violino, ed oltre a ciò parlava più lingue, ed avea cognizione di diverse parti della Matematica; l’ altro in quest’ anno istesso 1770 di forse altrettanta età, nativo di Salisburgo, e chiamato a nome Amadeo Mozart, che non solo eseguisce esattissimamente in sul momento qualunque composizione da Cembalo, ma anche sopra i soggetti, che gli si propon-

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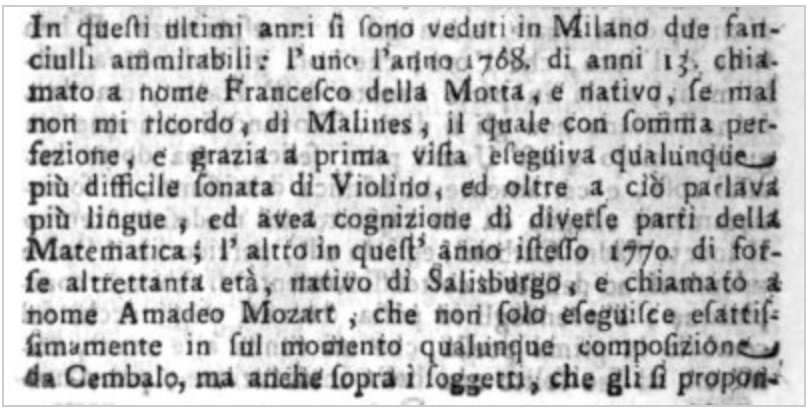
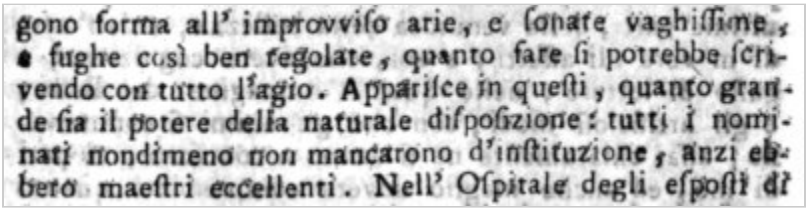


In queſti ultimi anni ſi ſono veduti in Milano due fanciulli ammirabili: l'uno l'anno 1768. di anni 13. chiamato a nome Franceſco della Motta, e nativo, ſe mal non mi ricordo, di Malines, il quale con ſomma perfezione, e grazia a prima viſta eſeguiva qualunque più difficile ſonata di Violino, ed oltre a ciò parlava più lingue, ed avea cognizione di diverſe parti della Matematica; l'altro in queſt' anno iſteſſo 1770. di forſe altrettanta età, nativo di Salisburgo, e chiamato a nome Amadeo Mozart, che non ſolo eſeguiſce eſattiſſimamente in ſul momento qualunque compoſizione da Cembalo, ma anche ſopra i ſoggetti, che gli ſi propon-

[continued bottom 215]

gono forma all' improvviso arie, e sonate vaghissime, e fughe così ben regolate, quanto fare si potrebbe scrivendo con tutto l'agio. Apparisce in questi, quanto grande sia il potere della naturale disposizione: tutti i nominati nondimeno non mancarono d'instituzione, anzi ebbero maestri eccellenti. *[...]*



gono forma all' improvviſo arie, e ſonate vaghiſſime, e fughe così ben regolate, quanto fare ſi potrebbe ſcrivendo con tutto l'agio. Apparisce in queſti, quanto grande ſia il potere della naturale diſpoſizione: tutti i nominati nondimeno non mancarono d'inſtituzione, anzi ebbero maeſtri eccellenti. Nell' Oſpitale degli eſpoſti di

Commentary

Giovenale Sacchi (1726–1789) was a Barnabite monk, mathematician, and writer. From 1758 until the year of his death, he was chair of rhetoric at the Collegio dei Nobili (Collegio Longone) in Milan. He was the author of a number of works on music theory and history, and in the 1780s he wrote biographies of Farinelli and Benedetto Marcello. This passage on Mozart (first reported by Giacomo Fornari in 1993) is from a footnote in Sacchi's *Della divisione del tempo nella musica nel ballo e nella poesia* (1770). It is part of a chapter addressed to the famous violinist and theorist Giuseppe Tartini (1692–1770) concerning Tartini's *Risposta di Giuseppe Tartini alla critica del di lui trattato di musica di Mons. Le Serre di Ginevra* (1767), itself a reply to Jean-Adam Serre's *Observations sur les principes de l'harmonie* (1763).

Nowhere in the passage does Sacchi say that he had heard Mozart personally. Leopold and Wolfgang Mozart first visited Milan from Jan to Mar 1770; Wolfgang's appearances there included a public concert on 23 Feb, and two private concerts at the residence of Count Firmian (the Palazzo Melzi), the first on 18 Feb for the Duke of Modena and his granddaughter Princess Maria Beatrice d'Este, and the second on 12 Mar, before a glittering audience of 150 members of

the nobility. (On Mozart's concerts at Firmian's, see our entry for 4 Apr 1770; for the one on 12 Mar, see also Pryer 2004). The Mozarts returned to Milan from Oct 1770 to Jan 1771 for the production of *Mitridate*, and Wolfgang gave yet another concert at Firmian's on 26 Nov (*Briefe*, i:405). Given Sacchi's position and interests, Mozart was precisely the kind of musician he would have been interested in hearing.

A few pages before the reference to Mozart, Sacchi mentions Count Firmian as a man of "the most vast erudition, and very fine discernment in all the fine arts" (211), and Sacchi seems eventually to have became a member of Firmian's Milanese circle (see our entry for 4 Apr 1770). But exactly when that happened is unclear. On Christmas Day 1762, philosopher and political economist Antonio Genovesi (1713–1769) wrote to Sacchi from Naples:

> Con questa medesima occasione ardisco di pregarla, se Ella avesse qualche amicizia con S. E. il. Sig. Conte di Firmian, di farmi un buon uffizio, ed è quello, che le dirò. Alcuni mesi addietro il pregai della copia di alcuni Opuscoletti del Panormita, che servono ad un mio amico, che quì ne scrive la Vita. Egli il Sig. Conte colla solita sua gentilezza se ne compromise. Non me ne ha poi più scritto, credo per il imbarazzo de' grandi affari. Io gli ho scritto in questi giorni di buone feste; ma non ho ardito di ricordargliene. Ella, se vi avesse qualche confidenza, potrebbe levarmi di questo peso. Ma si vorrebbe fare con molta delicatezza. *[...]* [Genovesi 1787, 132]

> On this same occasion I dare to ask you, if you should have some friendship with His Excellency Count Firmian, to do me a great favor, and I shall tell you what it is. A few months ago I asked him for a copy of some of the little works of Panormita for a friend of mine who is writing his biography. He, the Signor Count, with his usual courtesy, promised these. He has not written further to me about this, I imagine because of the burden of important business. I wrote to him in these days of great festivity; but I was not brave enough to remind him. You, if you have some intimacy, could relieve me of this weight. But it would need to be done with much delicacy. *[...]*

("Panormita" was the pen name of the poet Antonio Beccadelli, 1394–1471). Genovesi had become acquainted with Firmian in Naples in 1755 (see our entry for 4 Apr 1770), and in 1762 he evidently thought that Sacchi might know Firmian well enough to give the count a gentle diplomatic nudge about a forgotten promise.

On the other hand, a letter from Sacchi to Firmian written soon after the publication of *Della divisione del tempo* in 1770 mentions explicitly that it is Sacchi's first letter to the count, implying that the two may not yet have been personally acquainted, at least not well:

> *Eccellenza,*
>
> Dopo che uscirono in luce le mie dissertazioni intorno la divisione del tempo, ho ardentemente desiderato che insieme coll'altra, che già nove anni innanzi io aveva pubblicata sopra il numero e le misure delle corde destinate dalla natura all'uso dell'armonia, avessero la sorte di venire sotto il benigno sguardo di V. E. *[...]*

> V. E. mi perdoni se forse troppo ardisco scrivendole la prima volta con così lunga lettera, e più per altrui mano il che sono obbligato a fare perchè il mio proprio carattere non è quasi intelligibile. *[...]*
> [Primoli 1921, 480–81]

> *Excellency,*
>
> After my dissertations on the division of time saw the light, I have ardently wished that along with the other, which I already published nine years ago on the number and measure of strings designed by nature for the use of harmony, these would be destined to fall under the benign regard of Your Excellency. *[...]*
>
> May Your Excellency pardon me if perhaps I have written too boldly the first time with this long letter, as well as in the hand of another, as I am obliged to do because my own handwriting is barely intelligible. *[...]*

Sacchi's earlier book was *Del numero e delle misure delle corde musiche e loro corrispondenze*, published in 1761. This letter seems to show that Sacchi did not know Firmian (and certainly not intimately) by the time of the publication of *Della divisione del tempo*, which in turn makes it seem unlikely that he would have been invited to Mozart's concerts at Firmian's residence on 18 Feb and 12 Mar 1770. Thus if Sacchi heard Mozart personally before writing about him in that book, it would most likely have been at the public concert in Milan on 23 Feb. Sacchi's description of Mozart's skills—playing at sight, improvised arias and sonatas, and improvised fugues—is consistent with the programs of his other known public concerts during his first Italian tour (see, for example, the descriptions of his concert in Verona on 5 Jan 1770 in our entry for that date).

Sacchi's letter to Firmian is also a rare reference (the only one currently known to us, in fact) to any musical performance at Firmian's apart from his concerts for Mozart:

> Ho udito che V. E. ha fatto cantare in sua casa i salmi di B. Marcello *[...]* [Primoli 1921, 481]
>
> I have heard that Your Excellency has had sung in your house the psalms of Benedetto Marcello. *[...]*

The reference is probably to Marcello's *Estro poetico-armonico*, musical settings of 50 psalms published in Venice in eight volumes from 1724 to 1727.

Charles Burney was in Milan from 16 to 25 Jul 1770. He visited Sacchi on 24 Jul, just before going to Firmian's to dine, and he recorded the visit in his manuscript travel journal:

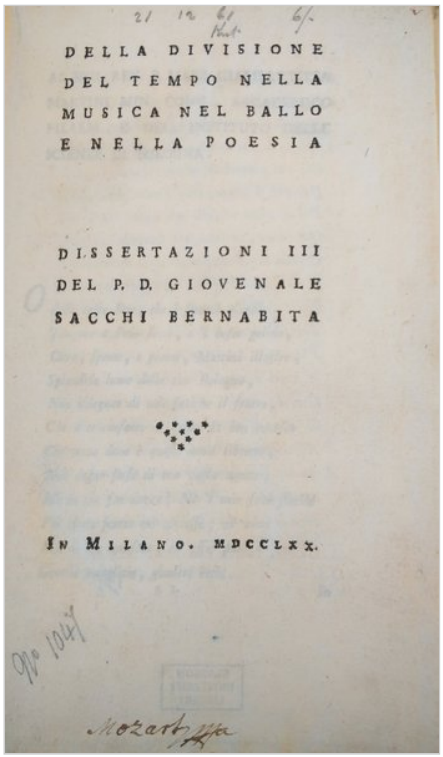
> From hence the abate carried me to Padre Sacchi a very learned musician here as to theory; he has published 2 very curious books which I had before purchased. He received me very courteously, and we entered so deep into conversation and were so well contented with each other, or at least ourselves and the subject that I was in danger of being too late

> for his Excellency's dinner. Padre Sacchi got my direction and gave me great encouragement to write to him if on reading his books I met with any doubts. [Burney 1770, 58]

Sacchi's "2 very curious books" must have been *Del numero e delle misure delle corde* and *Della divisione del tempo*. Sacchi evidently did not accompany Burney to Firmian's, and this again suggests that Sacchi was not yet in the count's circle. One can easily imagine, in fact, that while dining at Firmian's Burney might have talked of his encounter with Sacchi, and that this might have helped promote Sacchi's connection with the count.

Three of Sacchi's works on music were in Firmian's vast library at the time of his death: *Della divisione del tempo*, with the passage on Mozart transcribed above; *Della natura e perfezione della antica musica de' Greci* (1778), which also refers to Mozart; and *Delle quinte successive nel contrappunto, e delle regole deglia accompagnamenti* (1780). The second is dedicated to Firmian (see our entry on that book; on Firmian's library more generally, see our entry for 4 Apr 1770). The dedicatee of Sacchi's *Della divisione del tempo*, Padre Martini, was a prominent figure in Mozart's early development.

One further piece of evidence may support the notion that Sacchi heard Mozart in person before writing the passage given at the top of this page. The title page of a copy of *Della divisione del tempo* in the University Library, Glasgow, bears the signature "Mozart$_{m[pi]a}$":


DELLA DIVISIONE
DEL TEMPO NELLA
MUSICA NEL BALLO
E NELLA POESIA

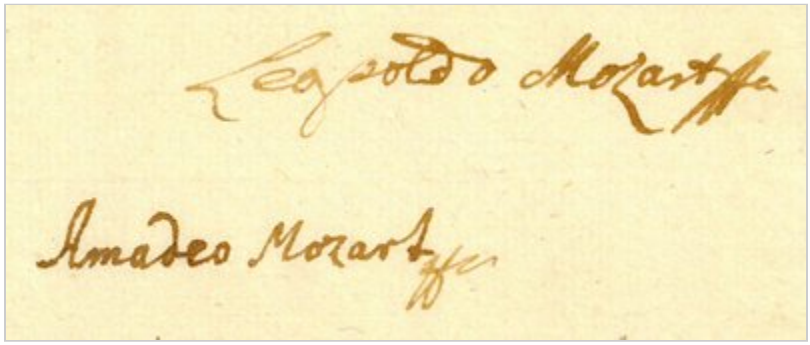
DISSERTAZIONI III
DEL P. D. GIOVENALE
SACCHI BERNABITA

IN MILANO. MDCCLXX.

Mozart



Opinion has been divided about whether Mozart father or son was responsible for the signature. Farmer (1958) considered it to be Wolfgang (in which he was followed by Deutsch in *Addenda*, 111), but Konrad and Staehelin (1991, 22) state unequivocally that it is Leopold; no evidence for the attribution is provided in either case. Keenan (2017, 71–75) gives a more nuanced (if still inconclusive) discussion of the question. The newly discovered receipt for *Lucio Silla*, dated 29 Dec 1772, signed by both Wolfgang and Leopold in italic script (rather than their more usual German *Kurrentschrift*), arguably provides the best basis for comparison.



In 1772, two years after the publication of Sacchi's book, Wolfgang's italic signature is still rather tentative in appearance, and his flourish for "manu propria" is unpracticed, neither of which can be said of the signature on the Glasgow copy of *Della divisione del tempo*. However, the forms of the characters and the sequence and connection of strokes in Wolfgang's signature are much closer than Leopold's to the signature on the Glasgow copy. Although the question remains open, if that signature is genuine, then it is more likely to be Wolfgang's, although perhaps later than 1772.

One naturally wonders whether Sacchi might have presented his book to Mozart on one of the composer's visits to Milan (Töpelmann 2016, 120). Alternatively, the Mozarts could have acquired it from someone else, such as Padre Martini, who might have known of the book's reference to Wolfgang. Sacchi's name does not appear in Leopold Mozart's travel notes for Milan, which may suggest they did not meet the writer personally during their first visit to Milan (there are no surviving travel notes for their subsequent visits to the city). The book is not listed in Wolfgang's estate inventory (see *Dokumente*, 497–500; also Konrad & Staehelin 1991, 12–19).

Sacchi also refers in *Della divisione del tempo* to "Francesco della Motte"; this was the violin prodigy and composer Franz Lamotte (c. 1751–1780). According to the existing literature on Lamotte his birthplace is unknown, but Sacchi states that he was a native of Mechelen (Malines) in the Austrian Netherlands (today Belgium).

An anonymous report in 1766 mentioned both Mozart and Lamotte as examples of musical prodigies (*Dokumente*, 63). In 1770, Leopold reported on Lamotte's stay in Naples and his appointment to Imperial service (*Briefe*, i:366). Much later, Wolfgang wrote to Leopold on 6 Dec 1783 concerning Leopold's violin student Heinrich Marchand: "er solle sich recht auf das *staccato* begeben. — denn nur in diesem können die Wienner den *La motte* nicht vergessen. —" ("He should concentrate especially on staccato—for in this alone the Viennese cannot forget *Lamotte*"; *Briefe,* iii:295).

Notes (⇧)

The original version of this commentary attributed the first modern publication of Sacchi's passage on Mozart to Keenan (2017). It was actually first published in 1993 by Giacomo Fornari. We apologize to Fornari for the oversight and are grateful to him for bringing it to our attention. We are also grateful to John Rice for his translation of this item, John Butt for kindly providing a copy of the Glasgow signature, and Peter Keenan for sending us his thesis and Farmer's article.

Sacchi's *Della divisione del tempo* is available in facsimile (Bologna: Forni, 1969).

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